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A FEW FIGS FROM THISTLES

By EDNA ST. VINCENT MILLAY

A FEW FIGS FROM THISTLES

Poems and Sonnets

THE LAMP AND THE BELL

A Drama in Five Acts

ARIA DA CAPO

A Play in One Act

RENASCENCE

Earlier Poems

In Preparation

LITTLE ACORNS

Illustrated by Fern Forrester

A FEW FIGS FROM THISTLES

Poems and Sonnets

By EDNA ST. VINCENT MILLAY



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A FEW FIGS FROM THISTLES

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A FEW FIGS FROM THISTLES

FIRST FIG

SECOND FIG

— TO S. M.

THURSDAY

THE PENITENT

THE UNEXPLORER

SHE IS OVERHEARD SINGING

THE SINGING WOMAN FROM THE
WOOD'S EDGE

THE MERRY MAID

PORTRAIT BY A NEIGHBOR

THE PHILOSOPHER

TO THE NOT IMPOSSIBLE HIM

DAPHNE

GROWN-UP

THE PRISONER

SONNET—Love Though for This

SONNET—I Think I Should Have Loved
You

SONNET—Oh, Think Not I am Faithful

SONNET—I Shall Forget You Presently

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them in this form.

FIRST FIG

My candle burns at both ends;
It will not last the night;
But ah, my foes, and oh, my friends—
It gives a lovely light!

SECOND FIG

Safe upon the solid rock the ugly houses stand:
Come and see my shining palace built upon the
sand!

THURSDAY

And if I loved you Wednesday

Well, what is that to you?

I do not love you Thursday—

So much is true.

And why you come complaining

Is more than I can see.

I loved you Wednesday,—yes—but what

Is that to me?

TO S. M.

If he should lie a-dying

I am not willing you should go
Into the earth, where Helen went;
She is awake by now, I know.
Where Cleopatra's anklets rust
You will not lie with my consent;
And Sappho is a roving dust;
Cressid could love again; Dido,
Rotted in state, is restless still;
You leave me much against my will.

THE PENITENT

I had a little Sorrow,
 Born of a little Sin,
I found a room all damp with gloom
 And shut us all within;
And, "Little Sorrow, weep," said I,
 "And, Little Sin, pray God to die,
And I upon the floor will lie
 And think how bad I've been!"

Alas for pious planning—
 It mattered not a whit!
As far as gloom went in that room,
 The lamp might have been lit!
My Little Sorrow would not weep,
 My little Sin would go to sleep—
To save my soul I could not keep
 My graceless mind on it!

So up I got in anger,
 And took a book I had,
And put a ribbon on my hair
 To please a passing lad.
And, "One thing there's no getting by—
 I've been a wicked girl," said I;
"But if I can't be sorry, why,
 I might as well be glad!"

THE UNEXPLORER

There was a road ran past our house
Too lovely to explore.
I asked my mother once—she said
That if you followed where it led
It brought you to the milk-man's door.
(That's why I have not traveled more.)

SHE IS OVERHEARD SINGING

Oh, Prue she has a patient man,
And Joan a gentle lover,
And Agatha's Arth' is a hug-the-hearth,—
But my true love's a rover!

Mig, her man's as good as cheese
And honest as a briar,
Sue tells her love what he's thinking of,—
But my dear lad's a liar!

Oh, Sue and Prue and Agatha
Are thick with Mig and Joan!
They bite their threads and shake their heads
And gnaw my name like a bone;
And Prue says, "Mine's a patient man,
As never snaps me up,"
And Agatha, "Arth' is a hug-the-hearth,
Could live content in a cup,"

Sue's man's mind is like good jell—
All one color, and clear—
And Mig's no call to think at all
What's to come next year,

While Joan makes boast of a gentle lad,
That's troubled with that and this;—
But they all would give the life they live
For a look from the man I kiss!

Cold he slants his eyes about,
And few enough's his choice,—
Though he'd slip me clean for a nun, or a queen,
Or a beggar with knots in her voice—,

And Agatha will turn awake
When her good man sleeps sound,
And Mig and Sue and Joan and Prue
Will hear the clock strike round,

For Prue she has a patient man,
As asks not when or why,
And Mig and Sue have naught to do
But peep who's passing by,

Joan is paired with a putterer
That bastes and tastes and salts,
And Agatha's Arth' is a hug-the-hearth,—
But my true love is false!

THE SINGINGWOMAN FROM THE WOOD'S EDGE

What should I be but a prophet and a liar,
Whose mother was a leprechaun, whose father was
a friar?

Teethed on a crucifix and cradled under water
What should I be but the fiend's god-daughter?

And who should be my play-mates but the adder
and the frog,

That was got beneath a furze-bush and born in a
bog?

And what should be my singin', that was christened
at an altar,

But Aves and Credos and Psalms out of the Psalter?

You will see such webs on the wet grass, maybe,
As a pixie-mother weaves for her baby,
You will find such flame at the wave's weedy ebb
As flashes in the meshes of a mer-mother's web,

But there comes to birth no common spawn
From the love of a priest for a leprechaun,
And you never have seen and you never will see
Such things as the things that swaddled me!

After all's said and after all's done,
What should I be but a harlot and a nun?

In through the bushes, on any foggy day,
My da would come a-swishing of the drops away,
With a prayer for my death and a groan for my
birth,

A'mumblin' of his beads for all that he was worth.

And there sit my Ma with her knees beneath her
chin,

A-looking in his face and a-drinking of it in,
And a-marking in the moss some funny little saying
That would mean just the opposite of all that he
was praying!

He taught me the holy-talk of Vesper and of Matin,
He heard me my Greek and he heard me my Latin,
He blessed me and crossed me to keep my soul from
evil,

And we watched him out of sight, and we conjured
up the devil!

Oh, the things I haven't seen and the things I
haven't known,

What with hedges and ditches till after I was grown,
And yanked both ways by my mother and my
father,

With a "Which would you better?" and a "Which
would you rather?"

With him for a sire and her for a dam,
What should I be but just what I am?

THE MERRY MAID

Oh, I am grown so free from care
Since my heart broke!
I set my throat against the air,
I laugh at simple folk!

There's little kind and little fair
Is worth it's weight in smoke
To me, that's grown so free from care
Since my heart broke!

Lass, if to sleep you would repair
As peaceful as you woke,
Best not besiege your lover there
For just the words he spoke
To me, that's grown so free from care
Since my heart broke!

PORTRAIT BY A NEIGHBOR

Before she has her floor swept

Or her dishes done,

Any day you'll find her

A-sunning in the sun!

It's long after midnight

Her key's in the lock,

And you never see her chimney smoke

Till past ten o'clock!

She digs in her garden

With a shovel and a spoon

She weeds her lazy lettuce

By the light of the moon,

She walks up the walk

Like a woman in a dream,

She forgets she borrowed butter

And pays you back cream!

Her lawn looks like a meadow

And if she mows the place

She leaves the clover standing

And the Queen Anne's lace!

THE PHILOSOPHER

And what are you that, missing you,
I should be kept awake
As many nights as there are days
With weeping for your sake?

And what are you that, missing you,
As many days as crawl
I should be listening to the wind
And looking at the wall?

I know a man that's a braver man
And twenty men as kind,
And what are you, that you should be
The one man in my mind?

Yet women's ways are witless ways,
As any sage will tell,—
And what am I, that I should love
So wisely and so well?

Handley

TO THE NOT IMPOSSIBLE HIM

How shall I know, unless I go
To Cairo and Cathay,
Whether or not this blessed spot
Is blest in every way?

Now it may be, the flower for me
Is this beneath my nose;
How shall I tell, unless I smell
The Carthaginian rose?

The fabric of my faithful love
No power shall dim or ravel
Whilst I stay here,—but oh, my dear,
If I should ever travel!

✓ !

DAPHNE

Why do you follow me?—
Any moment I can be
Nothing but a laurel-tree.

Any moment of the chase
I can leave you in my place
A pink bough for your embrace.

Yet if over hill and hollow
Still it is your will to follow,
I am off;—to heel, Apollo!

GROWN-UP

Was it for this I uttered prayers,
And sobbed and cursed and kicked the stairs,
That now, domestic as a plate,
I should retire at half-past eight?

THE PRISONER

All right,

Go ahead!

What's in a name?

I guess I'll be locked into

As much as I'm locked out of!

FOUR SONNETS

I

Love, though for this you riddle me with darts,
And drag me at your chariot till I die,—
Oh, heavy price! Oh, panderer of hearts!—
Yet hear me tell how in their throats they lie
Who shout you mighty: thick about my hair,
Day in, day out, your ominous arrows purr,
Who still am free, unto no querulous care
A fool, and in no temple worshiper!
I, that have bared me to your quiver's fire,
Lifted my face into its puny rain,
Do wreathe you Impotent to Evoke Desire
As you are Powerless to Elicit Pain!
(Now will the god, for blasphemy so brave,
Punish me, surely, with the shaft I crave)



II

I think I should have loved you presently,
And given in earnest words I flung in jest;
And lifted honest eyes for you to see,
And caught your hand against my cheek and breast;
And all my pretty follies flung aside
That won you to me, and beneath your gaze;
Naked of reticence and shorn of pride,
Spread like a chart my little wicked ways.
I, that had been to you, had you remained,
But one more waking from a recurrent dream,
Cherish no less the certain stakes I gained,
And walk your memory's halls, austere, supreme,
A ghost in marble of a girl you knew
Who would have loved you in a day or two.

III

Oh, think not I am faithful to a vow!
Faithless am I save to love's self alone.
Were you not lovely I would leave you now:
After the feet of beauty fly my own.
Were you not still my hunger's rarest food,
And water ever to my wildest thirst,
I would desert you—think not but I would!—
And seek another as I sought you first
But you are mobile as the veering air,
And all your charms more changeful than the tide,
Wherefore to be inconstant is no care:
I have but to continue at your side.
So wanton, light and false, my love, are you,
I am most faithless when I most am true.

IV

I shall forget you presently, my dear,
So make the most of this, your little day,
Your little month, your little half a year.
Ere I forget, or die, or move away,
And we are done forever; by and by
I shall forget you, as I said, but now,
If you entreat me with your loveliest lie
I will protest you with my favorite vow.
I would indeed that love were longer-lived,
And vows were not so brittle as they are,
But so it is, and nature has contrived
To struggle on without a break thus far,—
Whether or not we find what we are seeking
Is idle, biologically speaking.

